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ABSTRACT

American comic strips and cartoons can be useful in English-as-a-second-language classes. They introduce variety and provide an inside look into American life and thought. Many current popular comic strips have cultural, social, and political significance and discuss the American way of life, society, and the individual. The English-as-a-second-language teacher must consider certain evaluative questions before using a particular comic strip. Technical problems about vocabulary and use of colloquialisms must also be kept in mind. (VM)

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COMIC STRIPS IN THE TEACHING  
OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Language teachers as well as other teachers are constantly searching for new methods and techniques to improve their teaching effectiveness. Often the materials which could assist them in their task are flaunted in their faces without teachers being aware of them. Such potential material exists in newspaper comic strips and cartoons. Not only would the efficient use of these forms of mass media lend an enjoyable variety to the classroom, but also their introduction would offer the students an inside look into American life and thought, the Americans' preoccupations, their idiosyncracies and some of their characteristics, all in concentrated or capsule form.

Comics, although known throughout the world, do not enjoy the popularity in other countries to the extent they do in the United States. Bond, in An Introduction to Journalism, states that, "The latest published statistics proclaim that 82 per cent of men readers and 78 per cent of women readers daily devour the comics."<sup>1</sup> Scarcely any American paper, no matter how small, devotes less than one page daily to comic strips. Sundays, one finds 4 to 12 full pages of comics in color. Of the larger papers, only the New York "Times" includes no comics.

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Should not and could not language teachers take advantage of this form of mass media to increase interest and appeal in their classes? An example of the comic strip's effectiveness and potential value to teaching is pointed out by Alvin Silverman in The American Newspaper, "So many people in America read the comics that, during World War II, the strips were used to teach men and women in the armed forces."<sup>2</sup> Their major use at that time was to help servicemen learn foreign languages. When American comics were introduced into Bolivia and reached the areas where the Indian population was largely illiterate, there was an increase in the desire to learn to read. The reason was found to be that the Indians wished to know what such characters as "Mutt" and "Jeff" were saying.<sup>3</sup> Businessmen have also recognized the potential of comics and often develop their advertisements in the format of the comic strip.<sup>4</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, the comic strip will be separated from the older version, the cartoon, and subsequently dealt with exclusively. A number of various definitions have been presented for the comic strip. Silverman says, "a comic strip is a series of pictures in a related order. A single picture is called a cartoon."<sup>5</sup> Bond considers the cartoon to be a "pictured editorial."<sup>6</sup> The American College Dictionary states that a cartoon is "1) a sketch or drawing as in a newspaper or periodical, symbolizing or caricaturing some subject or person of current interest, in an exaggerated way. 2) . . . 3) a comic strip."<sup>7</sup>

The word cartoon does not inherently imply humour although Spencer states that it does. "The very word cartoon implies humor, .."<sup>8</sup> Yet the topics dealt with are not particularly or necessarily humorous. Spencer continues by stating, "the humor varies; some grim, some pathetic, some sad, some ironic, some bitter - but all portraying a measure of truth."<sup>9</sup> Comic on the other hand connotes "humour" or "funny" with the result that the comics are often referred to as "the funnies" or the "funny papers." Comic strips are not all humorous but often handle topics dealing with crime, adventure, or mystery.

In this paper, cartoon is used to describe a single panel based upon a contemporary event or a caricature of a current public figure and dependent upon the reader's knowledge of current facts and events. These cartoons, basically political and generally found on the editorial page, will not be dealt with since students must first be given current background information and such information could not be prepared by a textbook writer or teacher beforehand. Once the event is in the realm of the past, the value usually diminishes or becomes non-existent. The writers of this paper do recognize the value of cartoons, however, and recommend that they be utilized whenever applicable. Their value has been demonstrated by their recognition by the Pulitzer Prize Committee which has yearly awarded the "Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning" since 1922.<sup>10</sup> For the classroom, the comic or comic strip should prove more practical and can be prepared for in advance. If well chosen,

comics do not become out-dated as easily as cartoons. The single picture which neither caricatures a current public figure nor is based upon a contemporary event will be classified as a comic rather than as a cartoon.

At one time, one could have spurned comic strips as something degrading, something "low-brow," something for the illiterate. Today, however, many of the more than 500 American comic strips are "...leaning toward sophisticated satires of American life, or of humanity in general."<sup>11</sup>

#### The Basic Types of Comic Strips

In order to select good comic strips and to prepare background material, the teacher must be familiar with the basic types of comic strips. One way of categorizing them would be according to length. In this manner they can be broken down into four basic types.

- 1) Totally Self-Contained. Each panel or set of pictures is totally independent of the previous or future panel. The topic may, and usually does, vary from day to day with no formal connection. The reader need not have read the previous day's comic strip to appreciate the current one. "Beetle Bailey" or "Blondie" are representatives of this type of strip.
- 2) Quasi-Self-Contained. The panel is basically self-contained and can be understood without reference to the previous

day's or the following day's strip. The comic strip artist lets the strip revolve around one topic for a number of days until the public is ready for a change or until he has virtually exhausted the possibilities of that topic. Although the reading of the previous day's strip is not necessary, it may enhance the comprehension of the reader. The creators of "Peanuts" and "B.C." often draw their strips in this manner for a number of days and then revert to the totally self-contained type for a short period.

- 3) The Short Sequence. In the short sequence, it is necessary for the reader to follow the strip for a number of days to determine the point. Often there is little humour in this type of strip, but rather, one finds a mystery, crime, or adventure story being unfolded which is supposed to maintain reader interest at a high level. Two strips which fit this category are "Dick Tracy" and "Lil' Abner."
- 4) The Continuous Sequence. In the continuous sequence there doesn't seem to be any real crisis or climax with the situation being resolved and a new sequence being started as in the shorter sequence. The reader is taken through the daily life of the characters almost without beginning or end. An example of such a strip is "Gasoline Alley," in which characters are born, grow old and die as in life itself.

It is basically the former two types that appeal universally to the youngster, to the adolescent and to the adult; to the youngster and adolescent because of the humorous superficiality and the artful drawings and to the adult on the basis of the subterranean connotations and their criticism of some aspect of society or human nature.

It would also be possible to compare comic strips to the various literary genres; the short and long sequence to the short story and the novel, and the self-contained to the poem.

A poem makes the most efficient use of a limited number of words. Each word is chosen for its maximum effectiveness. So too, the self-contained strip attempts as briefly and pregnantly as possible to depict a story with a limited amount of language, but driving home with full force that which is used. An example of such a strip is "B.C." drawn by Johnny Hart. If we look at one of his four picture panels, we can see the following:

- 1) The first panel depicts a cave man standing at the foot of a hill. At the top of the hill a huge boulder has broken loose and is starting to roll down the hill.
- 2) The second panel shows us the cave man who has become fully aware of the rock and the danger it holds for him and his tribe.
- 3) In the third, he is rushing homeward screaming "Rock!" with all the emotional force of danger portrayed in it.

- 4) In the final panel, we see his tribesmen all lined up to help him, each having recognized the danger and the immediacy of the emergency, and each with a rock in his hand.

Thus we are shown, through the misinterpretation of the one simple work "Rock," that a situation has developed which endangers the entire community and which is a very clear case of the lack of communication. This type of comic strip is the kind which is most effective in making its point and which comes the closest to being the equivalent of the political cartoon.

During the remainder of the discussion concerning comics, we shall proceed from the following definition: In spite of numerous early examples which combined drawings and language and which extended from the Gobelin tapestries in Bayeux over the church windows during the Middle Ages to the Ruppin and Munich illustrated sheets<sup>12</sup> -- in 1806, Goya in painting the history of the bandit El Maragato probably produced the first strip in the modern sense -- , we consider comic strips to be a specifically American popular art which is in a state of continuous change, whose standards are based on traditional stereotypes, and which evolve from the creative impulses of individualistic caricaturists and from the indirect gyroscopic influence of the demanding and fickle readers which actually constitutes public opinion.

The Cultural Message of the Comic Strips  
When Applied to Area Studies Courses

If one considers comic strips from the aspect of their use in the classroom, then one should entrust a certain amount of choice and sequence to the students since pre-selection by the teacher could reduce the motivational element of the materials. In addition, it seems essential that the teacher have a clear picture of the concepts presented and in addition be knowledgeable concerning the historical background of this stratified type of trivial literature.

The exceptionally cultural relevance of the comics becomes apparent when we consider that, according to statistical reports, the comic strips in the Sunday editions are devoured by at least 100 million Americans from all social classes, age levels, and races. Hence the largest audience of any known mass media is attracted to the same material simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> Since this form of entertainment has selected as its underlying themes the American family, its children and their daily life, it can readily be adopted as one source for the study of the "American way of life." To what extent problems of accessibility develop for the student learning English, shall be discussed later. At the moment, we are primarily concerned with the development of specific points of departure leading to an acquisition of cultural information.

The question of the popularity of the comic strips as they appear in newspapers, in the form of books, or as they are presented on the screen should be asked at the time one prepares to

undertake an analysis of some strips. It would also be possible to use the topic of the American newspaper as a point of departure with some examples from the time of Joseph Pulitzer and his competitor William Randolph Hearst (compare Citizen Kane) and thereby trace the comics from early times to the present; especially those that still exist. Richard Felton Outcault created the series "The Yellow Kid" for Pulitzer, a strip which depicted the conditions of the New York slum area. The "Katzenjammer Kids," an American version of Max and Moritz with the background of a German immigration family, which Rudolf Dirks as an immigrant adapted for his employer Hearst, has since been drawn by many artists and is still to be found in the newspapers and in book form. (The Katzenjammer Kids by Joe Musial, Pocket Books USA, 95 cents.) "Dennis the Menace" and "Archie" have continued the tradition of the imaginative, mischievous youngster.<sup>14</sup> The things that Dennis, who is the age of his two prototypes Max and Moritz, undertakes are carried on by Archie and his adolescent high school pals.<sup>15</sup> Thus each age group receives "equal time" since adults are always the target of their burlesque escapades. Dennis is strikingly moderate when compared to Hans and Fritz, the "Katzenjammer Kids." He embodies the exact opposite of that which is referred to as the negative side of the comics. He epitomizes the baby of the family who stays close to the nest, and upon whom so much affection is showered, and to whom so much understanding is demonstrated that he cannot possibly be considered anything other than slightly mischievous. He represents

the "Spoon Fed Kid" and is the product of a liberal education which allows him a voice, as a fully participating member, in the entire affairs of the family to a far greater extent than is normally the situation in Europe and other parts of the world. The family scenes show the intensive American social participation from the grill party to the formal cocktail party, from the neighborhood bridge circle to the poker parties of the local big shots. The themes of stressed manliness tied together with "keep-yourself-fit" training and of the mandatory calorie counter and the bathroom scales are characterized from the point of view of the child. We are also returned to our childhood days through the eyes of Dennis as he indulges in a hamburger at the local snack shack or as he watches a program on TV.

While Dennis pokes fun at such things as the distribution of milk in the school and at the busy work concocted by the teachers, Archie typifies the high school student who is constantly at odds with the administration represented by the high school principal "Weatherbee." Archie always seems to find the opportunity to convincingly exonerate himself at the expense of this "noble" pedagogue. Although the comic strips choose to draw upon the middle classes for their topics in the majority of instances, "Archie" also brings into play the jeunesse dorée. The elegant house of a rich father turns into a playground for the students where the would-be Hippy son and the arrogant, demanding daughter conduct homework parties in the cocktail-party style of their parents.

Naturally standardized tests and their consistent usage, in spite of a universal mistrust in them, play a role in "Archie" as well as in the "Katzenjammer Kids." That parents, when possible, attempt to enjoy their vacation away from the younger generation without simply abandoning them is developed along the lines of the summer camp in "Archie" and "Peanuts," with the potentially unlimited humorous possibilities.

During his reluctant stay at the summer camp, Charlie Brown's friend Linus (Peanuts) worries about the possibility that his parents might move while he is gone without informing him. Thus the author, Charles M. Schulz, takes up the theme of the constant mobility of the American (more than 20% of the American families change their residence yearly), a phenomenon which he seems to consider a handicap for the children. In the same summer camp setting, Linus quotes from Jeremiah while the campers are gathered around the campfire, "Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears."<sup>16</sup> The absolute commandment of American society which says "keep smiling," remain optimistic, present yourself in a young, progressive manner in order to be integrated into society pays dividends for our young orator. Shy, modest Linus with his security blanket and thumb in mouth and in spite of his initial homesickness is promptly elected camp president. Thus we see the complete success of social adjustment.

The insecurity and rapid pace of living in the American daily life which helps lead to the attitude which Linus possesses offers

numerous variations and possibilities for satirical and critical observations about society as well as scathing attacks on certain aspects of public life.

What particular topics are often discussed by the "little people" in Peanuts? Some of the topics which often appear in their conversations are the constantly changing make-up of the neighborhood, the job situation, social status, peaceful community life, and satisfactory schooling. Naturally the necessary insurance (life, fire or what have you) is not missing in the catalogue of daily risks. This theme is drawn upon when Snoopy's house burns down. Since he was probably guilty of smoking in bed (according to Lucy), it is his own fault. His Van Gogh and all his other treasures have been lost and with mention of a Van Gogh painting we can move to the next area of interest, namely the lack or so-called lack of cultural life, which is related to the overwhelming interest in sports at the expense of intellectual activity.

Charles Schulz (Peanuts) has labeled Schroeder, the Beethoven lover, a semi-intellectual outsider who forgets all the splendors of this world once he is settled behind the keys of his miniture grand piano and who cannot be awakened from his dreams even by marriage-happy Lucy. In "Beetle Baily," Private "Plato" takes over this role. Incidentally he appears together with Lt. Flap, one of the first Black figures to appear in one of the most widely read strips since the initiation of the self-control code against horror, brutality and racial discrimination based on the Comics

Code Authority (1955).<sup>17</sup> Dr. Howland Owl (Pogo), a modern, psychologically-refined version of the "wise old owl" embodies less the type of sympathetic outsider such as Schroeder or Plato but much more the arrogant author and intellectual.<sup>18</sup> We often encounter this type of inhibited intellectual, who usually wears glasses, in entertaining films, in which a leader is shown being manipulated by or manipulating the intellectual individual who stands outside the usual boundaries of society and who is suspect of being an uncontrolled or uncontrollable, potential instigator of some type of disaster. (Note the cartoons, articles and commentaries based upon Richard Nixon's relationship to Henry Kissinger or the film Dr. Strangelove.)

The rhetorician and poet in Johnny Hart's "B.C.," on the other hand, can be considered as a thoroughly useful member of society because of his skillful capabilities as manager of the baseball team. He is a caveman and instead of a name, he has a peg-leg by which he can be recognized.

The technical vacuum alongside the civilizing, psychological, and cultural problems of the modern consumer society is not spared in the mirror of hidden critical analysis. Hence, the "waste-makers" who do not give the public all that they could are the target of a few pot shots in "B.C." and "Peanuts."

Law and Order is a natural for the slightly right-oriented Al Capp. In "Li'l Abner" we find him satirizing the poorly paid policeman (Fearless Fosdick) being beaten by a little old lady

(in reality a leader of a gang à la Ma Barker) with an umbrella and then being charged with police brutality.<sup>19</sup>

"Pogo" written by the liberal Walter Kelly reached its high point when he attacked and denounced the Communist witch hunts during the turbulent era of Senator Joseph McCarthy. The "Pogo" strip has been slowly but definitely pushed into the background by "Peanuts," "B.C.," and other strips which have a stronger entertaining element as well as requiring less concentration in order to be understood.

The form of the presentation alongside the intellectual or semi-intellectual strip becomes more and more varied; "Mickey Rodent" in Inside Mad<sup>20</sup> is a parody of the beloved Mickey Mouse strips, in which a constant and ingenious play on words is presented, although the reader is not considered capable of catching them and so they are presented in boldface type (Darn-Old Duck). The Katzenjammer Kids have become the KatchandHammer Kids. The preoccupation of many young American readers for themes based on the First World War, which is also reflected in Peanuts in Snoopy's constant battles on his Sopwith Camel with the Red Baron (von Richthofen) is satisfied in Mad with a constant flow of bowdlerized technical terms pouring from the mouth of the jet pilot "Smilin' Melvin."

Finally the snake takes hold of its own tail (or is it tale?) in various comic strips, best represented by the cartoonist Al Capp in his series "Li'l Abner" when he draws "Fosdick." Capp

points out to us that all of us, including Li'l Abner, are "hooked" on the strips. And so we find the "comic within the comic."<sup>21</sup>

The topical areas which would be of particular interest in the classroom could then be summed up as follows:

A. The area of American Family Life.

1. The tension between generations at home and in school.
2. The pampering of the children.
3. Summer camps.
4. Leisure time athletics and the calorie scale.
5. Television mania.
6. Events in the daily life of the family.

B. Society and the Individual

1. Code of conduct of the "successful" individual and the acceptance or rejection of the outsider.
2. Businesslife - criticism of the "wastemakers."
3. The lack of social security.
4. The lack or so-called lack of cultural orientation.
5. Preference for sports and amorous adventures compared to cultural activity.
6. Nostalgic look at the First World War and the glorification of the GI.
7. The defense of law and order.
8. The mistrust of standardized tests.

Thus, it is felt that a significant number of area study topics have been suggested which can be found at all times in many comic strips. These can be dealt with by the teacher without his becoming dependent on any specific publication. The writers of this paper do not wish to put together a methodical recipe for the selection of them but prefer to refer the readers to Ethel Tincher's rating scale. It is based on a 10-point system for the critical analysis of any comic strip.

1. Is the drawing good? (one point)
2. Does the comic have complex meaning, necessitating a knowledge of what is going on in the world on the part of the reader? (two points)
3. If the cartoon is meant to be funny, do you laugh when you read it? (two points)
4. If it is a serial suspense type of cartoon or comic, do you read it every day and follow the story with interest? (two points)
5. Do you really enjoy the comic, or do you read it just for the sake of finding something to do? Are you able to analyze the complexity of the meaning? What connotations are there in the drawings and in the dialogue? (three points)<sup>22</sup>

This chart may well serve the American teacher who is primarily concerned with developing a sense of critical evaluation in his students. For the teacher of English as a second language, it is essential to establish different guidelines for the purpose of selection. More important for English teachers are the following points:

1. Does the particular comic chosen present any aspects of American life?
2. What kinds of ideals or goals in life are approved or taken for granted?
3. What means or methods for reaching these goals are suggested?
4. What symbols and persons are condemned or rejected?
5. Can you recognize any distortion of facts, indoctrinations, or political manipulations? (Compare "Little Orphan Annie")
6. To what extent does the particular comic reflect social criticism?
7. Does it perpetuate some stereotype or cliché?
8. Which forms of simplification of problems did you find? (characters, types, slogans, prejudices etc.)
9. Does the reader accept the "message" more easily because it is disguised in a comic strip?
10. Try to define a comic strip by using the criteria quoted above.
11. Make a comparative study of comic strips and cartoons.
12. How would you explain the fact that in some cases the comics do not make the foreigner laugh?
13. Is the text of the strip such that it can be used by the teacher in a lexical or syntactical exercise?

Although the comics certainly can be considered very attractive for the instruction of English as a foreign language, a few technical problems should not be overlooked. The accompanying vocabulary of the story in pictures is often quite limited and often comes from the area of slang or colloquialisms. The idiomatic prerequisites for simple language drills, descriptions of the pictures, or narrative interpretations do not accompany the strip and must, therefore, be most carefully prepared.

Since their inherent comical, satirical or humorous elements all reflect a certain amount of native characteristics, which are not necessarily accessible to or easily understood by the non-American, and since even somewhat simple puns do not necessarily become apparent at once, it is highly recommended that (native) English-speaking assistants or informants be consulted for necessary explanations once the texts have been selected, so that a complete understanding and immediate, spontaneous reaction can be assured when the material is introduced in class.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bond, F. Fraser, An Introduction to Journalism, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1961, p. 254.

<sup>2</sup>Silverman, Alvin, The American Newspaper, Robert B. Luce, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1964, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Bond, p. 258.

<sup>4</sup>White, David M. and Robert H. Abel, The Funnies, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup>Silverman, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Bond, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup>The American College Dictionary, Random House, New York, 1965, p. 185.

<sup>8</sup>Spencer, Dick, III, Pulitzer Prize Cartoons, The Iowa State College Press, Ames, Iowa, 1953, p. 140.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 15

<sup>11</sup>Silverman, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>Hürlimann, Bettina, "Die Seifenblasensprache," Europäische Kinderbücher in 3 Jahrhunderten, Atlantis Verlag, Zürich und Freiburg in Breisgau, 1959, pp. 117f.

Those who wish a more detailed literary, critical analysis should refer to K. Riha, "Die Blase im Kopf in Trivialliteratur, Aufsätze Literarisches Colloquium, Berlin, 1964, pp. 176-191, or to David White and Robert Abel, The Funnies, An American Idiom, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963.

<sup>13</sup>Metken, Günter, Comics, Fischer Bücherei Nr. 1120, Sept. 1970, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup>Ketcham, Hank, Dennis the Menace . . . Teacher's Threat, A Fawcett Crest Book 232-01123, Greenwich, 1960, pages not numbered.

<sup>15</sup>... Archie and the Generation Gap, A Bantam Book F 5861, New York, 1970, pages not numbered.

<sup>16</sup>Schulz, Charles M., The Unsinkable Charlie Brown - Peanuts, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., New York, 1967, pages not numbered.

<sup>17</sup>Metkin, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>19</sup>Op. cit.

<sup>20</sup>Kurtzman, Harvey, et. al., Inside Mad, A Ballantine Book, 345.01565. "Mad started out three years ago as a comic book kidding only other comic strips. It has graduated today into a . . . magazine, kidding not only comic strips but movies, TV, novels, commercial ads or anything it feels like . ." (Backword by Stan Freberg in 1955).

<sup>21</sup>Metkin, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup>Tincher, Ethel, "Suggestions for Evaluating Comics," Using Mass Media in the Schools, ed. by William D. Boutwell, Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York, 1962, p. 168.